DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 083 864 FL 004 493

AUTHOR Wolverton, Robert E.
TITLE The Ship of Classics: The Ark, the Titanic, or the Good Ship Lollipop?
PUB DATE 21 Jun 73
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the 26th Annual Conference of the American Classical League, Western College, Oxford, Ohio, June 21, 1973

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Articulation (Program); *Classical Languages; *Classical Literature; *College Language Programs; *Greek; *Latin; Relevance (Education)

ABSTRACT

Various problems confronting teachers of the classics are explored through frequent reference to the metaphor of the classics viewed as a sailing ship in a sea of troubled waters. Several of the difficulties confronting classics teachers are seen to be related to an anti-intellectual mood prevailing in academe, scheduling problems, shifting school population, and a lack of articulation in classics programs between secondary schools and colleges. Methods for alleviating the difficulties caused by such issues are proposed. (RL)

ED 083864

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Robert E. Wolverton

A.C.L. Keynote Address, June 21, 1973

THE SHIP OF CLASSICS: THE ARK, THE TITANIC, OR THE GOOD SHIP LOLLIPOP?

Having been requested by the Program Committee to deliver the keynote address for this year's annual Institute, I very quickly decided upon a nautical analogy, at least for three reasons: first, the importance of ships in antiquity, historically and artistically, can hardly be over-emphasized; consider, for example, the ships of Odysseus, Jason, and Aeneas, or that carrying the kidnapped Dionysus, or those engaged in trade, piracy, exploration, or the founding of colonies. Secondly, the study of the Classics, at every time and in every country in which they have been taught, seems to have resembled a ship, alternately making fine progress over the smooth, wine-dark sea and battening down the hatches to ride out a squall-filled storm. Finally, by following through with this metaphor, I can cause my comments both to serve as a slow moving target for listeners and to make headway toward the designated port; I emphasize a "slow moving target" simply because I feel that any keynote address should draw fire from all sides and yet should not be entirely vulnerable to a direct hit.

Along with these justifications, I might add the obvious, namely, that my current position as president of the College of Mount St. Joseph on the Ohio naturally turned me to this metaphor. I harbor the distinct hope, however, that these remarks, while they may fluctuate, will not bring on nausea.

In reviewing my first year as president of the American Classical League, I am struck by two facts: the first is that there must be attention given to so many internal affairs of the organization, a fact which parallels

FL 004 493

my over 30 years of studying and teaching Latin and the Classics and may be referred to as the introspective problem. The second fact is that it is extremely difficult to combat attitudes and prejudices of those outside the field toward the field of Classics. Bridging both of these problems is a series of questions and wonderment on my part: why is there so much apparent inertia in our entire ship of Classics? who can describe our ship to prospective students of all levels? what role is our ship to play in the full naval armada of courses and subjects? is there anywhere on our ship a true rudder which we can use to guide us? what are the problems which seem to be affecting our ship and her course more seriously than ever before? These are a few of the concerns which make this year a most frustrating one, in that so much of what I had hoped to accomplish never was accomplished. As well, I can now much more sympathize with John Latimer and the heroic job he has done in trying to pull us all together, so that we could determine our goals and reach them.

A very fundamental part of our introspective problem is the very fight for survival being waged by nearly every teacher engaged in teaching at the secondary level. The fight is a lonely one and, I suspect, a losing one over a longer range for a basic reason, the teacher has to contend with matters and situations over which he has no control and very little influence. Thus, the teacher is--and must be--involved with a struggle demanding his best efforts and rather complete attention, a struggle which cannot be aided by suggesting better management techniques or more sophisticated goal-setting. The on-going struggle for survival also gives very little time to the teacher to describe his situation to outsiders, no matter how well-intentioned those outsiders may be, and they do include the various classical organizations.

At this point, you may ask what some of these enemies are, which sap the energies and command the constant attention of the teacher. I need not recount the litany to this audience, for all of you have experienced one or many of them. I will, however, note a couple of those which have come on more strongly in the recent past. At the national level, notice how many colleges and universities have softened or dropped languages as requirements for a graduate or undergraduate degree; notice, too that a renewed emphasis is being given what is now called "career education," an emphasis which carries what I believe to be a serious stripe of anti-intellectualism; third, notice that, beginning in 1958 with Title IV of the National Defense Education Act, languages were regarded as important to the country but that by 1973, for some totally unexplained reason, languages were no longer considered essential. What had happened in the 15-year span? Had the country suddenly become so withdrawn that there was no involvement with any other part of the world? Or, had the rest of the world suddenly learned English so well that there was no longer a need for Americans to know or study languages? We have no answers for these questions, for no rationale has ever been provided, so far as I am aware. The result of these three national trends--and more could be added, I'm sure--has denigrated the study of all languages (and even of some other erstwhile strong liberal arts fields) to the point that most Americans and most students say "who needs them?" and look for more "relevant" subjects. These national waves, then, smack mightily against our ship of Classics, which we may want to name "The Unsinkable Molly Brown."

At the local level, too, there are heavy swells: scheduling problems have become greater, as more courses are added, as more attractive courses (such as Literature of the Occult or the History of American Folk Music) are added, as fewer hours are observed, or as newer schemes of scheduling are

introduced. Another, more recent problem is that arising from shifts in school population, as either or more, or less, integration occurs and as central urban areas see their population change, with differing value systems and life styles replacing older patterns. In smaller towns, we witness the survival of Latin only as long as the teacher works until retirement or leaves town for other reasons; then, no replacement is hired, and Latin literally is a dead language. In the vast majority of school districts, there is still a lack of enthusiasm for our field on the part of guidance counsellors--and that may be stating the case mildly! At the local level too, then, the teacher is confronted with a neat "sink or swim" situation, and the "swim" alternative often does not mean that he can continue to teach Latin or classics.

Beset and beleagured on all sides, on fore and aft, can the Latin teacher be expected to participate in local, regional, state and national meetings? Can he be expected to answer questionnaires or to supply information, when he is inundated by very real and immediate concerns? The answer to these questions, based on my experience this year, is "No." Nor should the teacher be condemned out of hand for his lack of participation or response; his own priorities are correctly established, for he must <u>first</u> survive and then participate. Perhaps what is needed is a miracle such as that suggested by the story told me by a native Chicagoan; the ship carrying Pope Paul, Billy Graham, and Mayor Daley struck a hidden reef and quickly sank; happily, however, these three were able to swim safely to nearby island, which turned out to be uninhabited, and, in many respects, hostile. The three men soon decided that survival depended upon their being organized and a leader being selected. They agreed on a secret ballot, and Pope Paul naturally felt sure that he would win, since he would have his own vote and that of Mayor Daley, a Catholic. The

ballots were cast, and the final vote came out 5-2, in favor of Mayor Daley. How else, except by a miracle?

Nearly all the preceding, as you recognize, is applicable only to the situation at the secondary level. How do things look at the college-and university-level? There, it seems to me, Classics as a field is more than holding its own. On any campus where Classics can openly compete for students and where enthusiastic, competent instruction is taking place, the field is attracting students. To be sure, the larger-size classes are those taught in English, and the number of majors is not large; yet, because of the instructors' ability to teach exciting courses in English--everything from mythology and literature in translation to Greek and Roman athletics--the survival of the department is assured and the smaller classes at the upper division level are allowed. In such a situation, instructors, freed from the fight for survival, can teach well, can engage in research of their interests, and can become involved with regional and national organizations. As well, they should have time to assist their harried and harassed colleagues at the secondary level. Equally important, of course, they should have the interest in giving such assistance.

Now, it seems to me, we have come to one of the real moments of truth in our discussion: our field exists as two cultures, separated by the same subject-matter. One culture, at the secondary level, is more surrounded by the barbarians, has to be aggressive yet diplomatic, and has less authority and influence over things affecting it. The other culture, at the collegiate level, has the respect of tradition, can compete for budget and students more successfully, and, generally speaking, has more time and money to assume the position of leadership and statesmanship. These two cultures, as I have observed them over the years, tend to operate in completely different orbits,

occasionally waving to each other, but more frequently heard to ask questions about the other: "What can we do to get high school teachers to come to meetings, to serve on committees, to work with us?" "Why won't colleges and universities pay us any attention in our precarious situation? All they do is go to meetings, do their research, teach 9 to 12 hours a week, and ignore us."

As we all are aware, there have been various attempts at various levels to pull the two cultures together for the same common cause. There have been vertical committees and structures, horizontal committees and structures, joint groups and committees, identified consultants, and an executive secretary who served both as the activist and statesman, as the sort of Mr. Classics to those inside and outside the field. Yet, in many respects, the cultural gap (or gulf) is as wide as ever, and few new ideas have been put forth to bridge it. Perhaps the time has come to look at the total situation in a rather hard-nosed way to see if good intentions can be followed by constructive action, or if we shall stand on rhetoric alone and continue to wave occasionally to the other orbiting culture.

Before presenting some of the options available to us, let me note in passing that if I have over-drawn the case for the two cultures, (secondary and collegiate), I have not given sufficient attention to a most difficult problem within the secondary culture itself, the problem of communication and organization at the state level. From what I have learned this year, the effort to get secondary teachers together, physically and organizationally, is in many states next to impossible, probably for the reasons suggested earlier, that is, the fight for survival and the matters pertaining thereto.

What options, then, do we have at our disposal? We seem to have enough organizations, yet we seem not to be accomplishing our goals effectively through them. Perhaps, then, we might start there, trying some new schemes to make

established organizations more productive, or, if that is not possible, trying some new structure. In many ways, a full-scale meeting of all teachers of secondary schools and colleges and universities of a given state might be worth holding once a year. Thus, all teachers of high school Latin, and other related courses, could attend without having to attend the meeting for English teachers or meetings of other fields they may teach. A two-day session held on a college campus could allow teachers not only to know each other but to look together at their goals, their concerns, and their needs. An annual meeting of this sort would yield great results, and several ideas could be tried on an experimental basis: perhaps an organized group of recently retired teachers could be set up to serve for high schools the same purposes which the Campus Advisory Service does for the colleges. Perhaps an exchange program of teachers could be arranged; a college teacher could trade places with a secondary teacher for a year, or with a junior college teacher; or, a secondary teacher in a suburban school could trade a year with a secondary teacher in a village or in an inner-city school. Perhaps a panel of consultants could be established from among those present at the annual meeting; such consultants, whether from secondary or collegiate positions, would be familiar with problems and would know where to seek assistance from elsewhere in the state or from national or regional organizations. Such a meeting would at least ventilate problems at all levels and would begin to build more trust among all the teachers interested in the same field. It might lead to the ship of Classics in the state becoming the Good Ship Lollipop, where joy abounds.

Another option--one which might result in the ship's becoming the Ark--is to allow Latin and the Classics to die at certain schools and colleges. As teachers retired, or moved, or went into other teaching fields, Latin or

a small department would be quietly dropped, with few tears shed. On the other hand, those particular schools with strong programs, trying new courses, and experiencing fewer difficulties would become like the animals two-by-two. Just how this sort of selective euthanasia would be implemented is a matter for discussion.

A third option, and one affecting colleges and universities, is to cut back on the graduate school enrollment, thereby helping to keep the job market accessible and tenure available. In conjunction with this, assistantships could be given the graduate students to teach in public and private secondary schools.

Still at the college level, reward structures could begin to favor more those faculty members willing and able to assist high schools around the state. Fewer learned papers might result, but a greater good for a greater number might be achieved.

A fourth option, the Titanic approach, would be to continue as we are, assuming that little else can be done, but then why should anything else be done. "I'm set where I am," one might say, "but I do feel sorry for those struggling to stay afloat, out there in the ocean." This attitude, of course, echoes Lucretius, and it does exist in too many colleagues.

An opposite tack would urge us to declare a moratorium on the number of "new methods" to teach Latin and new books with new and unfamiliar content. "Back to the basics," might be the battle-cry.

A fifth option, and one which is being pursued in several places, is to replace existing language courses with courses in translation, mythology, and civilization courses. "Shouldn't those trained in the Classics believe enough in the values of the Greeks and Romans to teach them, even in English, to interested students of all ages?" is a rather persuasive arguement. Many

such courses, including those called "Humanities," have made their way into secondary and collegiate curricula and are meeting with success. Again, dynamic teaching by individuals, teams, or groups makes the difference between acceptance and rejection by students, administrators, and teaching colleagues.

A sixth option would be to perform the coup de grace for secondary Latin and allow it to join Greek as collegiate courses. By doing so, we would withdraw more honorably and cleanly, leaving the field (and the curriculum) to the more relevant and generally easier subjects. "Besides," we may argue, "there are plenty of good translations around if anybody wants to read the ancient authors; so why should we expect students to suffer through the original language and still stumble as they try to read the original?"

On the other hand, taking Latin out of the secondary school and putting it in the primary and middle schools may hold real promise. Certainly, the work done in Washington, D.C. by Dr. Judith Le Bovit could serve as a model for other programs, particularly in the large, urban areas. The question remains, however, of what to do for those students who may have had one or two years of Latin at these levels and wish to go further with their study. Clearly, most of the current textbooks would have to be revised, rewritten, or rejected. As well, colleges would have to begin new teacher-training programs, designed to produce teachers knowledgeable in the field and expert at communicating their knowledge to those younger students. These combined activities might prove a source of revitalization which would, in time, restore Latin to its earlier level of importance in the secondary schools.

A seventh option would be to wipe out all existing organizations and design a new one, perhaps analogous to the American Association of Teachers of French. Enough money from dues, now directed to only one office, would make possible an executive secretary with a full staff, people who could serve

as ombudsmen for the profession. Within the one comprehensive framework, we could have separate sub-sections, if they were desired, much like N.E.A. Further, a more realistic assessment of dues could be made: is 25¢ the most we can ever charge J.C.L. members, and are we at the limit of professional dues for teachers and professors? If we think we are, we should compare ourselves with other professional fields. And, what could (should) we do with more money?

These suggested options are not mutually exclusive, nor is the list an exhaustive one. I hope, however, that it will spur more conversation and thought at this meeting and beyond. We do have many problems, but, on the other hand, without problems, we would have no challenges.

Is our ship the Ark, the Titanic, or the Good Ship Lollipop? Are we the captain, the crewmen in charge of a sinking vessel, or are we simply passengers being carried along by whatever tide or wind comes along? Do we have a port, as we recall Seneca's homily that, if a ship has no port, then any wind is the right one?

I believe we have many good captains and crewmen, but I am not convinced that we are all pulling together as well as we might to save the ship and land safely in the harbor. We are not about to abandon ship, but neither can we expect a deus ex machina to appear and save us. It will take special efforts on all our parts; secondary teachers will have to find ways to work together more forcefully and effectively, will have to be more responsive to honest attempts of assistance, and better armed against their adversaries. Collegiate teachers will have to come down from their ivory towers, become more aware of their field and its possibility for good in today's world, and be more willing to do more than offer their services as consultants. The

old cannot simply count their years to retirement, and the young cannot simply do their own thing. We must seek anew to find Cicero's concordia ordinum, better understanding our strengths, our weaknesses, and our problems. Once we recognize who we are and where we are, we should be able to become masters of our own ship, determine our own course, and arrive in port safely.